Using Mentor Voice to Inform Educational Leadership Preparation Program Clinical Practices

Gregg B. Dionne
Central Michigan University

Jillian F. Davidson
Central Michigan University

The role of the principal in leading schools is vital to the success of the school. Mentors play a critical role in supporting educational leadership candidates during the clinical experience at the graduate level. This qualitative embedded single case design study explores the perceptions of mentors related to support from IHEs, collaboration, incentives, and challenges. This qualitative case study was conducted at one Midwestern IHE. Participants expressed that collaboration with IHEs, other mentors, and candidates was valuable and that they served as mentors to provide candidates with quality experiences in an effort to contribute to the development of educational leadership. Challenges were also reported and findings from the study offer educational leadership preparation programs pertinent information related to potential improvements in supports to mentors for graduate educational leadership programs.

Keywords: Mentor voice; educational leadership; clinical experience; case study

The role of the principal is complex and critical to successful and effective schools therefore, it is imperative that they receive high quality and effective training. A key part of this training is mentoring. Mentoring has long been considered a necessary part of developing educational leaders (Hayes, 2019; Swaminathan & Reed, 2020). In fact, extant literature emphasizes the crucial need for experiential learning for new and aspiring school leaders (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). For mentees, the mentoring experience has been linked to improvement in both the social and professional aspects of school leadership (Aravena, 2018). Sciarappa and Mason (2014), in a study exploring the perceived effectiveness of a mentoring program for principals from the principal's perspective, found that mentees experienced many professional successes such as developing relationships in the community and improving the atmosphere and environment of the school. Additionally, aspiring, new principals have noted the value of mentorship in their own development as leaders (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). Likewise, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) places such importance on the mentoring of principals that they have developed a mentor training and certification program that aligns with their mentor training competencies and Professional Standards for Leaders (NAESP, 2020).

Literature Review

The literature on mentoring employs a variety of definitions and frameworks in which to view the idea of mentorship. In early studies on mentoring in schools, much of the literature discussed it as a transactional relationship where the mentor gives information to the mentee (Hayes, 2019; Hayes, 2020). However, the principal's role has evolved over time to one of leader of learning, and thus the components of quality mentorship have also evolved (Hayes, 2019). Thessin, Clayton, and Jamison (2020) contend that a key feature of a quality mentorship relationship is that both mentor and mentee learn and grow throughout the relationship, it is not one way. Hayes (2020) agrees and expands this conversation to include a discussion on a critical-constructivist approach to mentoring where knowledge and skills of both participants are discussed and constructed. Crisp and Cruz (2009), in their literature review on mentoring practices, noted the inconsistency of the definition of mentoring over time, but found that recent literature continues to agree on three fundamental areas that define mentoring. These components were first outlined by Jacobi (1991) and include that: (a) the mentoring relationship centers on the growth and achievement of the mentee and includes many ways to support it, (b) the relationship expands beyond just the work of the clinical experience but includes advice and assistance regarding such areas as employment, psychological support, and career growth, (c) and that the relationship is both mutual and personal (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

There is a vast and varied amount of literature on effective mentoring practices; however, throughout the research there are common themes that inform best practices. Regarding mentoring practices in general, mentees should be fostered in developing their own leadership style that fits them and their school and is not necessarily the same as their mentor (Schechter & Firuz, 2015). Chikoko et al. (2014), in their study on leadership training for practicing school principals, found that employing an asset-based approach (focusing on the mentees strengths to build from) versus a deficit one (basing the mentorship on perceived weaknesses) yielded higher outcomes. The focus of the mentorship should include helping the mentee build their own

confidence as well as a growth mindset (Swaminathan & Reed, 2020). The development of mentees' ability to effectively communicate with a wide range of stakeholders is also a key outcome (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). Additional key factors for an effective mentorship experience include ensuring the mentees have chances to engage in actual leadership roles, that they are given a variety of schools, districts, and responsibilities to engage with, and there is a trust between mentor and mentee (Thessin & Clayton, 2012). Scott (2010) found mentors and mentees also noted the importance of time to communicate and resolve conflicts, that informal mentoring time was extremely valuable, and they valued and wanted more time for open-ended discussions with their mentors.

In terms of the mentorship process, Thessin, et al. (2020), found that there were common phases needed to put into place a strong mentoring relationship that are, "(a) establishing the partnership, (b) cultivating the mentoring relationship, and (c) learning through the leadership experience" (p. 37). After developing a full understanding of these phases, and mapping them to Knowles' principles of adult learning, Thessin et al. outlined the Educational Leadership Mentoring Framework (ELMF). Jamison et al. (2020), in their study on mentoring relationship development, noted that the relationships developed through these three phases too.

When considering formal programs such as principal preparation programs offered through institutions of higher education, a review of the literature outlines some common themes for best practices. Thessin et al. (2020) in a review of the literature on internship programs, found effective mentoring includes opportunities to engage in authentic leadership scenarios in order to practice taking risks, networking, self-reflecting, and providing feedback.

outlined three key factors for effective mentorship programs: choice and preparation of mentors, choice of mentees, and program evaluation. Clayton and Thessin's (2017) mixed methods study found the importance of consistency across the mentorships in programs and stated, "It is important for programs preparing educational leaders to work in tandem with school districts to ensure consistent experiences that acknowledge the leadership experiences the candidate already possesses when he/she begins" (p. 304). Training and preparation for both mentors and mentees was also noted as a key part of the success of these programs (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2012).

In terms of preparation for the mentorship, training should be provided for the mentees (Clayton & Thessin, 2017) and should include practicing how to engage in difficult conversations (Clayton & Thessin, 2017). Dominguez and Hager (2013) emphasize the value on programs using matching strategies and evaluating mentoring partnerships for assessing quality of fit. Furthermore, it is recommended if the mentees can be involved in choosing their mentor (Chikoko et al., 2014; Oplatka & Lapidot, 2018), and should include considerations of "educational ideologies and philosophies, social values, types of school, school level, and common expectations from the 'correct' mentoring process" (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2018, p. 218). Additionally, Clayton et al. (2013) emphasize the benefits of providing mentors and mentees with a structure for their conversations.

Training and Supporting Mentors

Despite the array of literature and research on mentoring in the educational setting, there is scant research specifically on the mentor role in the relationship. However, from the little

research there is, mentors should bring specific skills, knowledge, and abilities to the mentoring relationship (Gumus & Bellibas, 2016; Riley, 2020). Clayton and Thessin (2017) contend that the role of the mentor must be clearly outlined and understood by all parties and that mentors understand how they will support and assess the mentees. A variety of publications note key atrributes of mentors. These characteristics include open-communication and shared goals for mutual learning (Thessin et al., 2020). Additionally, Jamison et al (2020) highlight key mentor requirements found in literature such as content knowledge, pedagogy, and familiarity with financial management. Mentors benefit from the mentoring relationship (Bickmore & Davenport, 2019; Hayes, 2019). Schechter and Firuz (2015) noted that mentors benefited through, "growth, a sense of self-satisfaction, and obtaining new ideas from the mentee" (p. 381). Finally, like the mentee, training should be provided for the mentors (Chikoko et al., 2014; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018). This training should focus on fostering the skills mentors need to be effective mentors and should be completed before the mentorship begins (Clayton et al., 2013).

While the value of training for principal mentors is clear, little research has been conducted on training for principal mentors and on exploring the mentor's thoughts on how to best support them in their role as mentors within a university administrative development program. Thus, this study explores the perceptions of educational leadership clinical experience mentors related to training, supports, challenge, and potential incentives to better understand and support them.

Conceptual Framework

Administrative Preparation Programs hold a key role in developing quality clinical experience experiences, through intentional clinical experience design features and mentor selections. Stakeholders within such program, have a responsibility to collaborate with external partners to appropriately select, train, and support clinical experience mentors who will partner with candidates in their culminating clinical experience (Jamison et al., 2020).

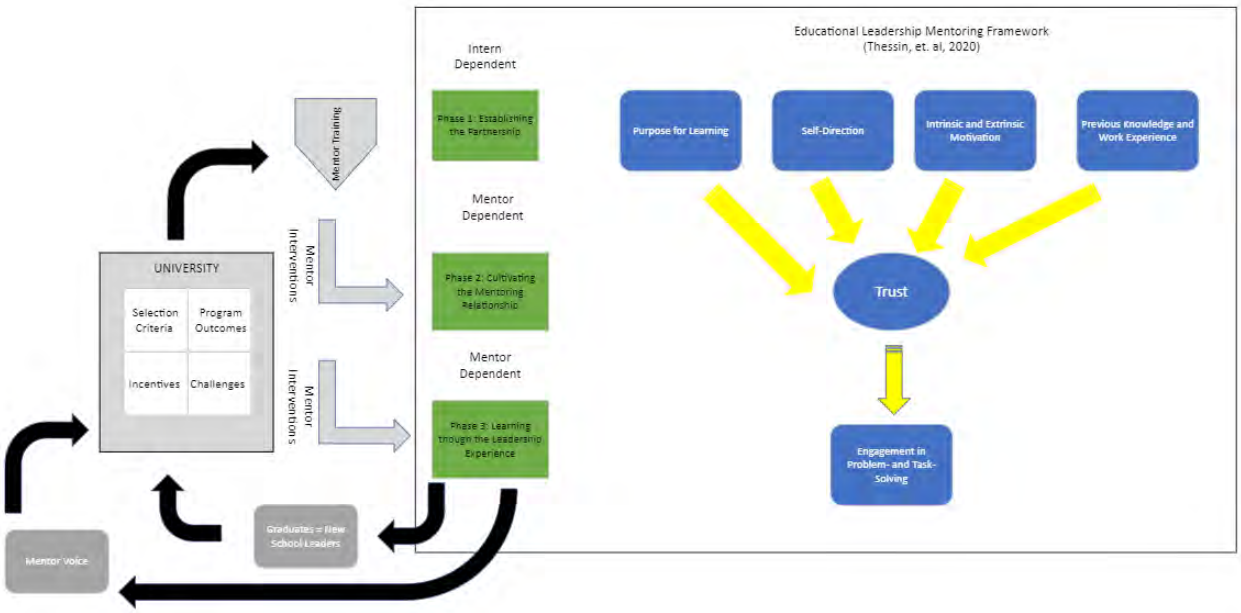
In the ELMF, Thessin et al. (2020) connect Knowles theory of andragogy (adult learning) with the development of a trusting relationship between candidate and supervisor across three developmental stages of a clinical experience. In follow up studies of EMLF, they found the quality of the relationship between a mentor and mentee impacts the level of leadership opportunities candidates are provided during their clinical experience resultant from mentor perspectives on the quality of the candidate's readiness and preparation for the tasks (Jamison et al., 2020).

This research study explores the ways administrative preparation programs can better equip mentors for the critical roles of mentoring and preparing candidates. The conceptual framework of our study therefore builds upon the Educational Leadership Mentoring Framework (Thessin et al., 2020, p.50) with a focus on mentor's voice and IHE interventions for mentor development.

As demonstrated by Figure 1, the University's function as two-way intermediary is important to the mentors. A dual-direction intermediary, University faculty and staff are responsible for listening to inputs and perspectives of current leadership practitioners regarding programmatic decisions such as selection criteria, challenges, mentoring incentives, and program outcomes. Additionally, mentors require clear communication from university stakeholders on program expectations to and processes to address candidate needs.

Figure 1

Mentor and IHE Collaborative Engagement



Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of clinical experience mentors in one educational leadership preparation program at one institution in the Midwestern US. More specifically, the relationship between an educational leadership preparation institution and mentors is considered in an effort to gain valuable information regarding supports provided to mentors, challenges of mentoring, and why mentors serve in the role of mentor. This study sought to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways can IHEs effectively support mentors to prepare educational leadership candidates?
2. What challenges do mentors experience and how could those challenges be addressed with specific supports from IHEs?
3. What are the primary reasons, such as incentives, that practitioners serve as mentors?

Methodology

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) “A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (p. 37). Given that this study is primarily defined by the unit of analysis, a bounded system, a case study approach was employed. More specifically, an embedded single-case design (Yin, 2016) utilizing a focus group approach to provide deep insights and allow for group members to interact and build on responses was utilized. Given that IHEs often administer educational leadership clinical experiences in different ways, a single-case design was further justified by research to allow for the collection of specific data.

Data Collection

Sampling for this study included a purposeful (Creswell 2013; Yin, 2016), homogenous (Suri 2011) technique. Invitations to participate were sent via e-mail to a total of 62 potential participants. E-mail addresses were obtained from mentor contact lists ranging from Fall 2020 to Spring 2022. Of these, 11 were no longer valid e-mail addresses. Two reminders to participate were sent and participants indicated their willingness to participate in a short survey with data being collected in Qualtrics. The focus group participants consisted of three educational leaders in the state who have previously mentored one or more educational leadership candidates completing a certification program at the building or central office level. The focus group was conducted in approximately 60 minutes.

The focus group was conducted in April of 2022 with two researchers collecting data and asking questions. Researchers focused four focus group questions with some follow up based on the responses. The focus group was recorded electronically and transcribed and audited for accuracy by viewing the recording and updating the transcript to reflect statements made by participants. Participants in the study had previous experience mentoring at least one educational leadership candidate through completion of the clinical experience. The role of the mentor included collaborating with candidates to develop learning plans, mentor shadowing opportunities, supervising mentor activities, and performing an evaluation of the candidate aligned to the National Education Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards. Clinical experience activities were aligned directly to the NELP standards. Candidates completed a minimum of 240 hours during the clinical experience and worked regularly with mentors throughout the process. Mentors and candidates participated in a minimum of two meetings with IHE faculty to plan and review clinical experience activities. Mentors were not compensated for their mentor role by the IHE. The clinical experience included two primary meetings between the mentor, candidate, and faculty member including initial conference with the mentor and candidate to discuss the learning plan, and a final meeting at the conclusion of the clinical experience to review progress and ensure the candidate has met the requirements for completion. The IHE at which the clinical experience takes place serves educational leadership graduate candidates throughout the US and is delivered in a virtual environment. The program operates virtually with regards to interactions between the candidate, mentor, and faculty and includes mostly candidates from the state in which the IHE is located.

Professional roles for participants of the focus group included building and district level leadership and representation from a charter school. Data was collected until researchers were confident that saturation was achieved, and that no new information was forthcoming during the focus group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2016). Each participant provided information related to focus group questions and built on responses and examples from other participants.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdale (2016) state that “Data analysis is a complex procedure that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 202). Analysis began with an open coding process including all focus group data using a qualitative analysis software

including the disassembling and reassembling of the manuscript and applying codes to establish patterns. Open coding involved the use of researcher notes and the organization of data into initial codes. Initial coding included words and short phrases to identify main topics. This was followed by analytic or axial coding to organize patterns into categories and subcategories (Yin, 2016). According to Merriam and Tisdale (2016) "Categories are conceptual elements that 'cover' or span many individual examples (or bits or units of the data you previously identified) of the category" (p. 206). Analytic coding specifically involved reviewing the transcript through the lens of each initial code and reassembling data into codes more specific to the content while making note of excerpts that spanned across codes. This resulted in the changing of some root codes and child codes. The final step in data coding included the formation of final category codes (Yin, 2016). During this final step, codes and categories were reviewed and renamed as appropriate. Member checking was conducted by providing participants via e-mail with an electronic version of the results from the focus group including the main concepts developed from data analyses and direct quotes from participants. No changes were recommended by participants.

Positionality

The faculty researchers conducting this study work closely with clinical experiences as part of an Educator Preparation Provider (EPP) at the IHE. Capacity for the researchers include instructional, clinical experience development, and clinical experience supervision in initial and advanced programs. The focus group was conducted by both EPP faculty members.

Berger (2015) addresses reflexivity by stating that "The degree of researcher's personal familiarity with the experience of participants potentially impacts all phases of the research process, including recruitment of participants, collecting data via interviews and/or observations, analyzing and making meaning of the data, and drawing conclusions" (p. 229).

While it is difficult to fully mitigate reflexivity in case study focus group research, researchers employed measures during the process to minimize bias. For example, researchers prepared specific focus group questions and agreed to utilize the questions to drive the focus of inquiry with minimal straying or semi-structured questioning during the data collection process. Additionally, the relationship between researchers and participants revolves around supporting educational leadership candidates throughout the clinical experience. In other words, bias and reflexivity can be minimized through intentional efforts. One example that could be more susceptible to reflexivity or bias involves the collection of data related to challenges and role of IHEs in supporting mentors. In the case of this research, data on these concepts were intentionally solicited from participants to provide valuable insights for improvement of supports for mentors.

Findings

Collaboration and Support for Mentors

The first research question sought to investigate how IHEs can effectively support mentors to prepare educational leadership candidates during the clinical experience. A theme that emerged from the group of veteran mentors stressed the importance of clarity around expectations and responsibilities for the interns and mentors. To address this, participants shared

examples of potential resources such as informational electronic recordings, webinars, and documents that clearly articulate mentor's role in the clinical experience and requirements for candidate completion of the clinical experience. In addition, participants shared a wealth of information related to collaboration.

Another significant theme to emerge from the data is collaboration between the mentor and candidate, as well as between mentors. While the mentor and candidate operate in a shared physical location, program faculty communicate with each virtually during the clinical experience. Participants expressed an interest in convening virtually and face to face (on-campus). Furthermore, mentors indicated that meeting face to face on campus would build a sense of collegiality among mentors, candidates, and faculty. One participant communicated this interest, offering availability to travel to campus. "You know, maybe a day, I would be more than willing to come to [institution] for a day with, with some colleagues that I'm working with and help sharpen their iron."

An unexpected finding from this study involves participants expressing the benefit of building collegiality specific to candidates and mentors collaborating from charter and traditional school settings. Participants discussed the divide between charter and traditional school environments, and that there was value in candidates learning about each of these environments during the clinical experience. One participant conveyed the value of collegiality by stating:

> And I've asked for a long time, why do we have to be that way? Why? Why can't we just be more collegial? Because we're all here to serve kids and to educate kids. And, um, but I think from an administrative candidate standpoint, it's good for these candidates to know what their options are and what they may aspire to want to do. Because it isn't just being a superintendent in a public or a principal and the charter or, you know, in the virtual world.

Another participant added that beyond learning about the charter school environment, cyber schools added another opportunity for candidates to learn about multiple settings during the clinical experience. This was summarized by the statement:

> That's a great point. I agree being from the charter world, um, you kind of get very isolated in that charter world. And then us being the cyber charter are even more specialized. So, um, it would be good for the mentors to make sure that they're experiencing or hearing things from other environments.

Furthermore, at the crux of this idea, stressing learning from outside their current setting a participant added that "We only know a lot about the bubble that we live in every day and... outside the bubble there is a lot going on." Participants also discussed unique relationships such as co-mentoring opportunities in which candidates could learn from other mentors and mentors could learn from each other. One participant reiterated the benefit of cross-collaboration between mentors asserting:

> I think something else that could be helpful as a mentor is just opportunities like this to see and meet other mentors. You know so, maybe we make those connections again early in that mentor mentee process. So, it just provides more people to reach out to. If you have a question, or if I wanted to reach out… and say, hey, what are you doing for your mentee or, you know, or how are you handling this?

The relationship between the mentor and candidate was reported as "unique" and participants shared that there is powerful learning and collaboration that takes place in the

absence of the mentor having a formal evaluator role. This allows the mentor to facilitate learning for the candidate in a different manner than as a direct report in a supervisory capacity. One participant articulates this benefit by stating:

> This mentor mentee situation is very non-threatening. I'm not evaluating, you know, so it allows me to focus more on professional learning and his growth and just again building that relationship. Um, I think it's just created a different dynamic between myself and a high school assistant principal than what might exist otherwise. I know him better than what I might usually know a high school assistant principal, and that's only going to help down the road, you know, for me and him as well.

Challenges

To address research question two, participants were asked about challenges and two main themes emerged including technical and timing challenges. First, the assessment management system in which mentors complete application materials, evaluate candidate work, and assess performance during the clinical experience was reported as having challenges. More specifically, accessing the system, logging in, and navigating the platform were challenging for mentors.

Second, the timing of the clinical experience course was reported as a challenge. More specifically, beginning the clinical experience in the fall (September) poses challenges for mentors. It was reported that educational leaders at the school and district levels have significant responsibilities during this time of year and that they would prefer a start date that would allow them to dedicate more time to working with candidates as opposed to when the demands of their administrative duties are not so demanding. Participants reported that August would be a more advantageous time to begin working with candidates since September is when leadership duties are more significant. One participant expressed this reporting "… September is just a hailstorm of busyiness and, you know, good busyness energy, starting the school year off right… I have a lot of time to prepare and plan and really reflect on certain things in August." Another participant reinforced this idea stating that "The timing of the delivery of the information is important… the month of August would be really nice to really ramp up." A third participant built on these sentiments and shared that:

> So, to piggy back off of that, and to reiterate the, the whole August piece… if you're streamlining the expectations, and you know who your mentee is, then during the time where kids aren't yet here, you can have some really good conversations that don't feel like well, it's just one more thing because you know, you're focused on the planning of the year and those sorts of things versus the implementation standpoint. So um, streamlining the expectations and then giving an appropriate amount of time for the mentor and mentee to get together, um, to really hatch what the focal points should be in the in the program during the year.

Incentives and Why Mentors Serve

Research question three sought to understand why participants served as mentors and what incentives could be provided to them as mentors. With regards to why they served as

mentors, participants reported that they felt it was important to share their expertise, support their staff in completing the educational leadership degree, and provide a quality experience. Furthermore, supporting the profession and contributing to the ongoing need for educational leaders was a motivator for mentors in this study. The importance of recognizing potential leadership within schools and districts and being able to support those potential leaders was expressed by all participants. One participant responded to why they agreed to serve as mentor by stating that "It was just an easy yes and kind of like my other colleagues said we're in the business of bettering humanity and bettering people one by one and the business of relationships." The quote resonates with much of what was articulated by participants stressing the importance of relationships and improving leadership by supporting aspiring school and district leaders. Another participant, who was also a completer of the program, provides additional insight by stating:

> I mean, we always just try to help others out, but having gone through the program myself, too, it was kind of a way to pay it forward. You know, somebody did this for me and gave me the experiences and exposure. So, it's good to be able to do that for somebody else. And kind of keep that, um, you know, chain going.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported the necessity to provide valuable experiences for candidates as the primary reason they served as mentors. The balance of pushing candidates to try new things and get outside of their comfort zone without burdening them too much resonated across participants. This involves "not just checking the box" and earning the degree but developing expertise and building confidence by participating firsthand in leadership activities that are new and unique. According to the group, learning new things and developing positive relationships is possible through the clinical experience given the collaborative nature of the relationship.

In terms of incentives, mentors reported that State Continuing Education Clock Hours would incentivize their participation due to their ease of accumulation. More specifically, being able to utilize these toward certification updates was reported as valuable. This was preferred over tuition reimbursement or other potential financial incentives. Participants also shared that providing more information to potential mentors to increase awareness of the commitment and expectations would be helpful in recruiting and incentivizing potential mentors.

Discussion

Findings from this study offer valuable feedback for decision-making in clinical experiences and educational leadership programming at large. This study builds on previous literature about the importance of mentoring and experiential learning for school leaders in training (Hayes, 2019; Swaminathan & Reed, 2020; Thessin & Clayton, 2012). This study is consistent with previous literature related to the importance of relationships (Bickmore & Davenport, 2019; Hayes, 2019) and the need for training and supports for mentors (Chikoko et al., 2014; Gimbel & Kefor, 2018; Clayton et al., 2013). This study also uncovered some innovative ideas about how IHEs can work with mentors to provide optimal experiences for candidates in educational leadership programs. This study affirms that mentors serve in the role to give back to the professions and contribute to the advancement of educational leadership. Findings related to collaboration cannot be understated. Participants stress the importance of collaboration and

provided concrete ideas for how IHEs can support mentors and provide collegial opportunities for mentors, candidates, and IHEs.

Challenges were expressed with some potential solutions offering practical insight for IHEs to consider. Clear information provided to mentors through one and two-way communication mechanisms also emerged as important considerations for IHEs. In addition, incentives revolved largely around developing leadership among candidates and continuing education opportunities toward certification renewal.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study support the importance of IHEs providing a sufficient level of support for mentors through the development and deployment of informational items to provide a foundation of resources. These may include informational videos, recorded webinars, and documents to support mentors. Importantly, the expectations for candidates and mentors should be articulated clearly. This research also uncovered the importance of opportunities for collaboration between mentors, candidates, and IHEs. Participants stressed the importance of collaboration multiple times and clearly articulated a desire for more mentor-to-mentor interaction to learn from each other and provide candidates with a more vast clinical experience by leveraging the expertise of other mentors. It is also clear that mentors expressed an interest in participating in relevant activities with IHEs through virtual and face to face opportunities. These interactions should complement the provision of supports and resources. Furthermore, collaboration between the mentor and candidate is critical to the experience and forms the foundation for why participants serve in the role of mentor. These interactions are essential to the development of candidates and building leadership capacity within schools, districts, regions, and states. The power of the non-evaluative relationship between mentors and candidates can serve as a vehicle for mentoring educational leadership candidates in a unique manner that focuses on learning and improvement.

IHEs should also consider the timing of program implementation. As expressed by participants, September proves particularly challenging for devoting enough time to mentoring.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

A significant challenge for this study was mentor availability. Given the demanding nature of educational leadership, finding time to collect data proved difficult. Additionally, a multiple-case study design could offer additional relevant data. Another limitation is that data were collected from mentors serving from one institution and data collected from multiple IHEs could expand the understanding of similar findings from additional perspectives. This could be particularly useful when paired with reporting of how the clinical experience is administered within different IHEs along with the level and types of supports and collaboration provided to mentors. Further quantitative research should also be considered to gain an understanding of the perceptions of mentors related to collaboration, considerations for IHEs, supports for mentors, and incentives. These quantitative data, paired with additional focus groups and interviews, may provide a more wholistic look at how IHEs can improve and support clinical experiences for mentors and candidates.

Conclusion

Qualitative findings from this study provide valuable information related to supporting mentors and candidates in advanced educational leadership preparation programs. Given the importance of educational leadership development, it is imperative that programs consciously support mentors and gather valuable feedback to inform programmatic decisions. Using intentional resource sharing, collaboration, and active partnerships with mentors, IHE faculty remain relevant and provide critical information, allowing programs to be responsive to ever-changing PK-12 educational environments and leadership demands.

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